



Peter Barron

Ten years after they launched a charitable foundation in memory of their daughter, who died, aged 24, from meningitis, James and Sally Bethell have raised half a million pounds...

Jessica's legacy

PHOTOGRAPHS smile from the walls. Paintings of a young woman riding horses, amid the beauty of the Wensleydale countryside, hang proudly in frames. There are memories of Jessica Bethell everywhere you look in the North Yorkshire family home.

Those memories are especially poignant today, as 2025 begins, because it is a milestone year for veteran racehorse trainer, James Bethell, and his wife, Sally.

It marks a decade since the couple did their best to create something positive out of tragedy by launching a charitable foundation in memory of their daughter, who died, aged just 24, after contracting Meningococcal Group B (Men B).

And, as they look back on a decade that has raced by, they can take comfort in the knowledge that they have hit the £500,000 milestone in donations for meningitis research, and a range of other good causes.

"Oh, I think she would have been impressed," smiles James, speaking from the kitchen of the couple's home, overlooking the hills, near Leyburn.

Their story is eloquently told on the home page of The Jessica Bethell Foundation website...

October 1st, 2012, was the worst day of our lives. We left home around 9am, kissing Jessica goodbye as she came in from riding out. She said 'I've got a bad headache, Mum'. Those were the last words she spoke. She had died by 6pm that evening.

Meningitis kills in four hours. We will never understand how a beautiful, healthy young person like our daughter could pass away so suddenly. We miss her more than words can say and always will...

The foundation was officially launched at a dinner in 2015 and,



James and Sally Bethell with retired racehorse Granston. They grey was Jessica's favourite horse to ride on the High Moor gallops at Middleham. Her parents have raised £500,000 in her memory PICTURE: PETER BARRON

ten years on, the half a million pounds mark has been reached – and James and Sally have no plans to stop.

Indeed, the tenth anniversary year presents them with an opportunity to highlight the work of the foundation. They want to help more good causes, and raise more money in memory of Jessica (pictured below), who was sister to Clare, Cinny, and Edward – now one of the country's most promising young trainers.

The initial aim had been to set up a rehabilitation and fitness centre in Middleham for injured jockeys, similar to Jack Berry House, in Malton, but those plans didn't come to fruition.

Instead, James and Sally have consistently raised funds for good causes, primarily meningitis research. Out of the £500,000, around £150,000 has gone into research, principally through the Meningitis Research Foundation.

The couple recently visited Nottingham University to see how a research project is progressing

following a donation of £34,000 from the foundation to examine Men B carriage amongst first year students.

Another £31,000 donation was made to a research project at Imperial College London, aimed at identifying Men B proteins that can be used in a vaccine to prevent the disease.

PROFESSOR Sir Andrew Pollard, Director of the Department of Paediatrics at the University of Oxford, has also received a foundation grant.

Sir Andrew was knighted in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2021 for services to Public Health, especially during the pandemic when he was co-inventor of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid jab. His work now includes research into a finding a meningitis vaccine.

"There are some incredibly dedicated people working in the sphere of meningitis research, and we feel humbled to be giving them money in memory of Jessica," says James. "We know it is being

used for the right reasons."

During the pandemic, James and Sally also used money from the foundation to buy iPads for schools in the north, including Spennithorne Church of England Primary School, in Leyburn, and Middleham Primary School.

More recently, £25,000 was donated to Grand National-winning jockey Graham Lee and the Injured Jockey Fund. Graham, who was successful both over jumps and on the flat, suffered

life-changing injuries in a fall at Newcastle in November 2023.

Another donation of £5,000 was made to the New Beginnings Horses charity, to support a project aimed at enabling inner city children to benefit from interacting with horses.

Closer to home, the foundation has sponsored a host of local sports teams in and around Middleham, and other parts of the North East.

Most of the money for the foundation has been raised by friends from the racing fraternity through dinners at York Racecourse, and the couple are "hugely grateful" to Chief Executive and Clerk of the Course, William Derby, and his team.

"Whenever we've needed something, they've been there for us," acknowledges James.

ITV Racing presenter Matt Chapman has also played a pivotal role in compering the dinners, while guest speakers have included The Princess Royal and Carol Vorderman.

"We've been so lucky to have had such amazing support, and it gives us a lot of comfort to know that we have been able to make a difference," says Sally.

IN a stable, a short walk from the family home, Jessica's favourite horse, Granston – the winner of ten races and £159,000 in prize money – is still thriving at the age of nearly 24, and just back from a roll in the field.

He's the handsome grey Jessica is riding in a painting that hangs in the lounge.

"She loved riding him on the High Moor," recalls Sally. "She was a good rider and had lots of friends, who have also been enormously supportive."

"She's still part of our lives and always will be – her influence is never going away," adds James.

What is clear is that Jessica's parents will not be resting on their laurels, despite reaching the £500,000 mark. There are plans for another fundraiser in the 10th anniversary year, although details are still being finalised.

More donations to good causes are in the pipeline and, beyond 2025, there is a determination to keep the foundation going.

"Our ultimate aim is to save lives, and any support we receive is hugely appreciated," says James. "We miss Jessica desperately, and we want to try to help stop other families having to go through what we've been through."

■ To find out more about the Jessica Bethell Foundation, and to make a donation, please go to: www.jessicabethellfoundation.co.uk



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Sally and James Bethell